

Monk by HashtagLEH

Series: [Something Like a Family \[17\]](#)

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Abusive Neil Hargrove, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Billy Hargrove & Maxine "Max" Mayfield Have a Good Relationship, Child Abuse, Established Relationship, Gen, Hurt/Comfort, Lifeguard Billy Hargrove, Literal Sleeping Together, M/M, Neil Hargrove is His Own Warning, Not explicitly though, Protective Billy Hargrove, Protective Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Racism, Racist Language, Scoops Ahoy Steve Harrington, Shadow Monster | Mind Flayer - Freeform, Slurs, Stranger Things 3, if you haven't picked that up by now though I don't know how to help you, it's just implied

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Relationships: Billy Hargrove & Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington, Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair

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Summary:

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But Neil's inclusion of Max was suspect, especially as he kept his burning gaze on her as he continued, like Billy wasn't even there.

Considering the fact that it was always *Billy* who took the brunt of punishments made it slowly sink in that the ticking clock that always soldiered on in the background, the one leading up to when Max would be the one to experience firsthand Neil's abuse – it had come to an abrupt end, and much sooner than he had thought it would.

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Author's Note:

Man, this one was hard to write, mostly because of the child abuse that I had to deal with. Neil is a piece of shit again, look how surprised we are. It is important to the plotline though, so I had to include it.

WARNING: we get the n-word thrown in here a couple of times because Neil, and I didn't asterisk it out because we don't get to do that in real life, so. Also there is a pretty intense scene of child abuse - if you feel you need to skip it, stop reading at "I've been fucking another boy for months now and you had no idea" and come back at "His hand shot out, grabbing Neil by the shoulder". From there, what happened is implied in the dialogue so you don't need specifics of what happened but it is still in a tense scene when you come back.

Hope y'all like it!

The whistle echoed shrilly around the concrete pool area, and everyone stopped what they were doing, looking toward the lifeguard chair to see who would be called out for disobeying the rules now. They didn't used to obey the whistle rules, when the pool had first opened, but as soon as Billy Hargrove got a job there and decided to lay down the law to the little punks, they had quickly realized that ignoring him meant they would be banned for a week at the very least, and for life if they were a repeat offender. No one wanted what happened to Jimmy Turner to happen to them.

"No running, pipsqueak!" Billy yelled at the little boy, probably about nine or so, who almost face planted with the speed at which he ran around the perimeter of the pool. After the boy eked out an apology along with his agreement, Billy raised the whistle to his lips again, blowing sharply to tell everyone that they could get back to what they'd been doing.

"I see the kids weren't exaggerating about how you've put the fear of God into everyone," a familiar voice said dryly, and Billy looked down, fighting the twitching of his lips as his eyes rested on his boyfriend staring up at him with a raised eyebrow and a teasing expression. His eyes were hidden behind his usual Ray-Bans, so Billy couldn't see them, but he knew that he was amused.

"More like the fear of Billy," Billy smirked, nudging Steve's arm with his toe since he couldn't exactly greet him how he wanted to in such a public setting. "No one wants to be kicked out this early in June, with the whole summer ahead of them."

Steve tilted his head in agreement at that. "You still getting off at four?"

Billy grimaced a little. "Heather needed someone to cover the last half of her shift, and since Sean is out sick I'm here till seven," he said apologetically. "Probably won't be able to come over till tomorrow."

Steve shrugged. "No big deal. I brought the kids for the day, so we'll just hang out here for a while."

Billy finally looked away from Steve, and back to the pool, eyes quickly finding Max with Lucas, Will, Mike, and even El. He raised an eyebrow, looking back to Steve.

"Hopper let her out?" he said, a little surprised. Hopper was better about his paranoia now, about not keeping El so cooped up these days and letting her hang out with her friends, but the pool was an especially public place with a lot of people that Billy would've thought wouldn't be allowed for a couple more months at least, when she would join the others at the high school.

"It took some convincing," Steve admitted with a shrug and a small smirk. "And whining, on the kids' part. I think Hopper figured that they would sneak out if he said no anyway, and it's better to have me or you watching them. Finding out *both* of us would be what cinched it, I think."

Billy looked out at the pool again, watching El as Mike was patiently

teaching her how to doggy paddle in the shallow end. She looked cute, in a swimsuit that Max had certainly had a hand in picking out for her, with the bright yellow that was Max's favorite color.

"Don't leave me to watch them alone," Billy directed with a mocking scowl. "They're as much trouble as the whole rest of the pool combined."

"Aw, don't pretend you won't be watching them *more* now," Steve teased, squeezing Billy's ankle a little before moving his hand to rest more casually on the leg of the chair. "At least Dustin is at camp till the end of the month – he's as much trouble as the rest of 'em combined."

"You clearly haven't spent enough time with Max if you think *he's* the problem," Billy only half-joked. He pushed Steve lightly away with his feet. "Go on, go swim with the brats. I gotta do my job."

"What a *responsible adult* you are," Steve teased, and then ducked away laughing when Billy kicked out more sharply with his foot, just barely able to avoid the kick.

"Make sure Max is wearing sunscreen!" Billy called, and then flipped off his boyfriend at the amusedly pointed look he got for it.

Mike and Lucas had to be home by seven for dinner, so Steve gathered his little ducklings around six, knowing that it would take everyone a while to get out and showered before finally making their way to the car to go home. Max insisted that Billy could take her home, and convinced both Steve and Billy to let El stay while the boys were taken home. Billy agreed to take El back to the cabin when he saw her pleading look, with full-on Bambi eyes that she definitely knew by now he was particularly weak for, and so Max and El spent the time swimming together without the boys' influence as Billy finished up the rest of his shift.

The pool didn't really start clearing out until about six-thirty, as everyone went home for dinner, and Billy knew that there would be a lull in pool goers until about seven as people showed up after their own earlier dinners, favoring an evening swim over the bulk of people who showed up with the sun high in the sky. Billy enjoyed the

last little bit of his shift where he was still on guard, but not quite so much with less people to watch for, and watched the two he'd adopted as sisters have fun together in the shallow end. Max was a strong swimmer – had to be, after going to the beach all the time – but El was still a beginner, and he was glad the redhead was accommodating her friend without complaint.

“Shitbird, peanut – vámonos,” Billy called as he passed off the lifeguard chair to Michael. As he passed the girls in the pool on the way to the locker room to grab his things, he heard Max explaining the meaning of the Spanish word to El. It made him remember the fact that El was still learning a lot of English vocabulary, despite it being easier for her to speak in full sentences now than it had been when he had first met her back in October. He made a mental note to ponder on later whether she might like to learn some Spanish, and if maybe some Spanish kids' books would help her. Then he wondered about helping Max with her Spanish – she knew enough to understand the language, but couldn't speak it herself. Although they would have to hide it from Neil, Billy was pretty sure that Max would like to learn more – and it would make it easier, if she wanted to take Spanish at the high school this upcoming year.

He forgot these thoughts as he was distracted with helping the girls after they had showered off; Max asked if he would French braid her hair so it wouldn't frizz as it dried, and then El insisted that her hair was long enough for Billy to do the same for her. Billy pretended to be aggrieved, but he didn't really mind as he worked at each of their hair and then pushed them out the door and to his Camaro.

He dropped El off first as promised, giving an absent wave to the Chief when he appeared in the doorway to welcome El back and assure himself that she was still fine after her day in the public.

“Steve is really not subtle,” Max declared, leaning back in her seat as Billy pulled onto the paved road. “He has a pool just fine in his backyard, but on his day off he decides to take us all to the *public* pool, where – hey! You happen to be the lifeguard on duty. The only thing that would've made it more obvious would've been if he showed up *before* you clocked in.”

Billy smirked a little. “Does this have a point, or are you just being a

little shit?”

“My *point*,” Max emphasized, “Is that you should take us to Scoops now to see *him* at work.”

Billy raised an eyebrow. “And what if *I* don’t need an excuse to see him? What if I was fine just going to visit him on my own while you guys are busy with your games?”

Max frowned at him. “Well, you should take us *anyway*,” she insisted, voice having just a thread of a whine in it as she seemed to detect that she wasn’t going to get her way. “It’s hot, and ice cream is the *perfect* way to cool off these days!”

“Ugh, alright you little shit,” Billy groaned exaggeratedly. “You make some good points. But if you think I’m paying for ice creams for the whole monster squad, you’ve got brain damage.”

“That’s okay!” Max brightened. “I’ll just get Lucas to pay for me.”

“Oh, yeah?” Billy teased, “And where is *he* getting all his money from?”

“He mows lawns,” Max reported. “And with all the rain, the grass has been growing so fast, so he could mow the same lawn like, every five days. He’s practically rich.”

“Yeah, so long as you all don’t blow it at the arcade,” Billy snorted. He couldn’t count how many times he had been asked for a dollar or ten from the kids when they ran out of money at the arcade – and that wasn’t even counting however many times they had asked Steve for the same thing.

They bantered and snarked at each other lightheartedly for the rest of the drive home, and Billy realized that he was honestly very content. He could smell the mixture of sunscreen and chlorine and the canvas of Max’s bag and the sun-warmed skin, and while it wasn’t exactly like California had been, it was familiar enough that he was happy to just have the time spent with her after a good day. He didn’t care how corny and mushy that made him sound though, because it wasn’t like he would ever say something like that *out loud*.

He parked in front of the house on Old Cherry Road like he always did, grabbing his bag and getting out of the car, following behind Max as they walked up to the front door. He vaguely noted that the light in the front room was on, the sound of a game on TV heard through the thin walls, but he didn't give it much thought as Max was giving him grief about his taste in ice cream again.

As soon as they walked through the front door though, he heard the TV click off, and a silence fell on the room that was threatening in its eeriness; it made Billy snap to attention, even as he closed the front door behind them.

They stopped when they saw Neil sitting in his chair, the recliner that sat on the far side of the room so that he could see everything going on. His expression was dark, and he was just setting the corded remote down on the arm rest when they turned to look at him, conversation fading.

Billy really didn't know what the problem was now, ran his mind through the list of things it might be, but whether or not he'd done everything he was supposed to that wouldn't matter if something had happened at work or something to piss him off. Neil would always find a reason to be angry with Billy whenever it suited him.

He glanced over at Max, pretending casualness because he didn't want to fan the flames of Neil's anger over whatever had happened.

"You can grab first shower," he told her, but before she could even respond with that familiar fire of upset in her eyes at him trying to send her out of the room, Neil was speaking up even as he rose to his feet.

"No, no, Maxine – you stay here," Neil said, an almost pleasant tone to his voice. Billy heard that familiar threat and fury underneath though, the one that said Neil was a coiled snake waiting to strike, and he tensed, hand falling from the strap of his backpack to curl loosely at his side as he watched the older man.

"Why don't we sit down together, talk about our days?" Neil said, and didn't wait for them to respond before he went on. "I was on my meal break when one of my coworkers came to tell me about his

morning. He took his kids to the pool. He recognized you two as my kids. And you know what he told me? You want to guess who he mentioned you were hanging out with?"

When Neil first started speaking, Billy assumed he was going to lead into something about Steve. Maybe that was self-centered of him, but considering past experience, he thought it right to be wary of the possibility that someone had seen the two of them together, had connected the dots to why they were so friendly – or if they didn't, that Neil would after having seen them at graduation with each other and someone else's observations was all that he needed.

But Neil's inclusion of Max was suspect, especially as he kept his burning gaze on her as he continued, like Billy wasn't even there. Considering the fact that it was always *Billy* who took the brunt of punishments made it slowly sink in that the ticking clock that always soldiered on in the background, the one leading up to when Max would be the one to experience firsthand Neil's abuse – it had come to an abrupt end, and much sooner than he had thought it would.

"It was my fault," Billy blurted, connecting the dots even sooner than Max had and trying desperately to turn Neil's attention on him instead, hoping to delay this another day, another week, another year, until they could escape it completely. "I told her to go play with them so that I could pay more attention to one side of the pool, and that side was where the problem kids usually are so I have to watch them more anyway but I wanted to watch out for Max..."

"So you knew," Neil interrupted, disgust lining his features as he took a step closer. "You *let* Max be around that *nigger*."

A frisson of revulsion shook down Billy's spine at the word, at the very idea of applying that to *anyone*, let alone *Lucas*. Lucas was as much of a shit as the rest of them, but he was *his*.

But he couldn't protest it though, because he knew Neil, and he knew how to deal with him, and he pulled Max back with a hand on her elbow so that she wasn't standing in front of him anymore.

"It was just for a little bit!" he said desperately, because he could take a hit, *wanted* Neil to hit him and turn his attention on him,

rather than taking out anything on Max. "There were other people there..."

"Yes, so *everyone* could see you whoring around with the negro," Neil scorned, stepping closer again. Max made a protesting noise in her throat, but was too stunned by the suddenness of this attack that she didn't have words for the moment – which Billy could only be thankful for, because that would just stoke the flames of Neil's anger. "I know that this wasn't a one-time event – don't treat me like an idiot."

"Could've fooled me," Billy retorted, desperate now to draw Neil's attention away, and he spoke without thinking, just saying the first thing that came to mind that would piss him off. "I've been fucking another boy for months now and you had no idea."

The sudden punch to his stomach was expected, and Billy felt a flare of satisfaction for a moment even as he stumbled back, because he could take the beating for this and continue to keep Max safe like he'd been doing for years and that could only be a victory.

"I already knew you were a fag," Neil sneered, shoving him hard enough that he tripped over the loose bit of carpet where front room met kitchen and he went crashing to the ground. He wasn't even in the yelling stage right then, but somehow the dark hatred in his voice – the one that *promised* violence rather than suggesting it – was even more frightening. "But you had to let your vile *wrongness* infect Maxine, too? That is *unforgiveable*."

"Stop!" Max protested, grabbing Neil's arm to try and pull him away from where he was advancing on Billy. "Neil, *stop* it!"

But never before had their differences in size and strength been highlighted so strongly, because Neil just shook her off like she was an annoying, errant bug, focus on Billy for the moment. He pulled back a foot, landing a kick to his ribs hard enough that Billy felt the crack shudder through him, and he bit his lip to hold back a shout of pain, curling up instinctively to minimize the damage, grateful at least that his back was to the wall for now, providing a further layer of protection.

“Get *out*,” Billy groaned at Max, because there was a *reason* he was taking this, and she was supposed to take advantage of that and make her escape while she could, and hope that Neil would forget about Max in favor of being reminded that Billy liked dick.

But Billy was naïve to think that this was something that Neil could be distracted from, because after a sharp kick that would leave a dark bruise on his arm but thankfully hadn’t broken it, Neil said, “*Stay* there.” The tone already implied the “I’ll deal with you later” that he meant, and Billy could only watch in horror as Neil then turned to Max, who was still trying to pull him away, and without pause he struck her hard enough across the face that she was thrown back with a sharp cry of surprise and pain, automatically holding a hand to her face as blood rose to the surface.

Neil was yelling at Max, was continuing to advance with a familiar threatening pose, intending to fuck her up just as badly as he’d done to Billy back in California, but despite the chaos, Billy felt a cold calmness settle over him. He rose fluidly to his feet, ignorant to the twinges of protest his body gave at the movement, a red haze settling over his vision as fury filled his veins at the sight of his father towering over his sister who was several inches shorter.

His hand shot out, grabbing Neil by the shoulder and ripping him away from Max, spinning him around and propelling him to the wall he had just been protecting his back with. Furiously, he shoved him against it, one hand squeezing around Neil’s wrist, the other arm pressed across his throat to keep him immobile. Neil struggled, but he had been assuming for a long time now that he was stronger than Billy just because he never fought back. Billy had been stronger for *years*. It was almost hilariously easy how easy it was to subdue him, after having been so afraid of him and his anger for most of his life.

“*This* is never happening again,” Billy said flatly, the undercurrent of fury obvious in his voice. “You do *not* touch Max.”

“You *fucking*...” Neil was cut off when Billy pressed harder against his throat, enough to make him choke on his words and for his struggles to get more desperate.

“*Respect*, and *responsibility*,” Billy gritted out. “Maybe show a little of

your own, you sick *bastard*. She is *thirteen*. You stay the *fuck* away from her, you understand?"

"Fuck – you," Neil wheezed out, eyes burning with hate and the promise of violence.

Billy's lips tightened, and he kept his gaze on his father even as he directed his words to Max. "Go pack your things. For a while. Be quick."

Max hesitated, but a moment later her footfalls were heard hurrying down the hallway toward her room.

As soon as she was gone, Billy spoke again, not lightening his hold on Neil in the least. "Here's what's going to happen. You're going to go to bed – don't worry about waiting for Susan to get back from her book club or wherever the hell she is tonight. We're going to go spend the night at a friend's house. Maybe we'll even go to El's house. You remember who her dad is, right? Yeah, he's the Chief of Police." For the first time, a hint of fear appeared in Neil's eyes, and it gave Billy a vicious satisfaction to see. "I'm not going to tell him what happened tonight – at least not for now." His hold tightened around Neil's wrist, until he felt the bones and tendons creak under his hand.

"But make no mistake, Neil," he hissed furiously, leaning in closer to his face, "If you *ever* lay a hand on my sister again, I won't just kill you. I will make your life *hell*. I will make sure that *everyone* finds out just what you've done in this household – I don't even care if they find out I'm a fag because of it. Because then everyone will know just what a *disgusting* man you are. Your *image* – of this nice family man, of a good Christian, a good *father* – will be *dirt*. And that's even if you *don't* go to jail for the rest of your miserable life. You hear me?"

Neil stared at him with unmistakable loathing, but he looked fearful, like he finally believed how strongly Billy would defend Max and he didn't want that precious image to be tarnished. He nodded once against Billy's arm, mouth twisted in a sneer, but Billy was pretty sure he was cowed enough that he wasn't going to try anything else. He released Neil with a shove, just as Max reappeared holding two bags. One of them was Billy's.

“And what the hell am I supposed to tell your mother?” Neil demanded as Max opened the front door.

Max stopped, and swung her head to look at him, fury in every inch of her, blue eyes bright and freckles standing out against the purpling bruise on the right side of her face.

“The truth,” she said flatly. “That you’re an abusive piece of shit.”

The door slammed closed behind them.

Billy was going to drop Max off at the cabin to be with her best friend, but Max wanted to stay with him, oddly clingy after what they’d just been through. (Or, perhaps not so odd – they had gotten closer in the past few months, and he’d just defended her from a monster. Wanting to stick close to him didn’t seem all that strange, with things looked at from another angle.) He wanted nothing more than to see Steve, so rather than joining her at the cabin, he took her with him to the Harrington residence.

Steve opened the door looking confused but happy to see him – that was, until his eyes took in the bags at their sides, and the growing bruise on Max’s face behind her brother, and the slightly lost expression increasing in Billy’s eyes. His own expression went serious even as he stepped aside in wordless direction for them to come inside.

“We won’t be long,” Max blurted even as she followed Billy inside and Steve closed the door behind them. “We just need a place to stay for a night or two.”

“Stay as long as you need,” Steve said automatically, eyes tracking over them as he obviously looked for further injuries. “What – what happened?”

“Neil happened,” Billy said flatly, not seeing any point in hiding the worst of it from his boyfriend any longer. “He found out about Max and Lucas and he went apeshit.”

“And Billy was a total badass,” Max chipped in. “He tossed him

against the wall and threatened him to stay away, and then we got the hell out of there.”

Steve stepped closer, fingers twitching in a way that said he wanted nothing more than to pull his boyfriend close, but he refrained due to Max’s presence.

“Are you okay?” Steve asked, voice strained and worried, looking between them, eyes evaluating as much as they were deeply concerned.

“We’ll be fine,” Max was the one to assure him. “I just need a shower.”

“Upstairs, second door on the right,” Steve said automatically. “There’s some arnica in the cabinet and ice packs in the fridge.”

“Thanks, Steve,” Max said, going toward the stairs.

As soon as he was certain that his sister wasn’t going to reappear, Billy let himself slump, stress bleeding from his frame and hands reaching automatically for Steve. Steve grabbed him around the waist, hugging him as much as he was checking that he wasn’t further injured and just hadn’t wanted to reveal any of it or talk about it with Max right there. He didn’t feel any wetness that would mean he was bleeding, and Billy didn’t wince away from any touching, but with the other boy that didn’t necessarily mean he was unhurt.

“I could’ve killed him,” Billy muttered into Steve’s shoulder, hands clenching in the back of his shirt. “I *wanted* to kill him. He hurt *Max*.”

Steve blew out a breath, trying to remind himself to be calm while at the same time completely agreeing with his boyfriend as he remembered the redhead’s steadily darkening bruise on her cheekbone. He wanted to take his nail bat and introduce it to Neil Hargrove’s crotch.

But that’s not what was needed right now, so he just moved his hands over Billy’s back, trying to console him as best as he could with them standing up and Billy not looking like he had any intention of moving

any time soon.

“Billy,” he said after a moment, “Did he hurt you?” He wanted to just keep hugging his boyfriend, to comfort him and put him to bed and try to move on from this night, but he would never forgive himself if Billy had internal bleeding or some shit and died in his sleep.

“He got a couple of kicks in – no big deal,” Billy’s breath puffed against the side of Steve’s neck, ruffling his hair a little. Even as he spoke, his posture was relaxing, truly not bothered by his own abuse as he drew comfort from his boyfriend. Steve didn’t know how he did it.

“*Anything* is a big deal,” he hissed furiously. “He shouldn’t have fucking *touched* you.”

“I’m used to it,” Billy said with a small shrug, finally pulling back a little as he regained his composure. He rolled his eyes a little at the mutinous look on Steve’s face at his words and said, “I know, I shouldn’t have to be. I’m not an idiot – I know what he does is *wrong*. But for now, there’s not really anything I can do about it.”

“You’re staying here for now,” Steve said, an order as much as it was a plea. “You and Max. You can’t go back to living with that piece of shit. We can figure everything else out later.”

Billy wanted to argue, that much was clear – but he was so tired, and the idea didn’t sound half bad. He exhaled a breath, hand tightening around the one that had found Steve’s at some point he didn’t remember, and gave a small nod.

“Okay.”

Max stared at the alarm clock from where she lied in the bed of one of Steve’s guest rooms. 12:16 AM. She had been staring at the glowing red numbers for over an hour now, unable to sleep.

She had been terrified earlier that evening, faced with the full brunt of Neil’s anger. She thought the last time she had been that terrified had been when she had been staring down into the tunnels below, at

her brother about to face down the horde of demodogs while she was with the boys in the relative safety above them. She had thought Billy was going to die that night. She had thought Billy was going to die tonight, too.

The thought, the *memory*, of Billy trying to draw his father's attention made her furious. The fact that he *had* to made her so angry that she wanted to punch something – preferably Neil's stupid face.

But she was also furious with herself, because as soon as she had learned exactly the type of man Neil was, she had wanted to take some of Billy's hurt, some of the abuse disguised as punishment, the ones that she *knew* were because of her. And yet, as soon as Neil actually *was* looking her way with that furious intent that had been reserved solely for Billy before, she had completely frozen. She had been stunned, not having expected it to come so *soon*, although she really should have been ready. She had gotten careless recently, not hiding her relationship with Lucas as much as she had months ago, when Billy had first warned the both of them how to hide it. Neil finding out had been inevitable.

She wanted to cry at the thought of Billy stepping in front of her even now, even after she *did* know better. Her stupid, overprotective big brother had blurted out that he hadn't stopped being gay here in Hawkins, in an attempt to make Neil hit *him* instead, and Max had known that he was protective of her before – but never before had this been thrown so sharply into the light as his outright *admittance* of actions that he'd been hospitalized for before.

She watched as the numbers on the alarm clock blinked over to read *12:17 AM*. She punched her pillow and rolled to her other side, looking out the window instead, watching the play of the pool lights shining on the wall.

She didn't want Billy to have to protect her. She wanted him to go and be free in California with Steve just like they both wanted, without having to worry about what was happening back in Hawkins.

Well, there wasn't really anything she could do about the Neil situation, but she *did* know that she could help him by making sure his most important secrets were kept. She didn't trust that Neil

wouldn't reveal it to everyone in Hawkins at the worst time that he was gay, and she couldn't trust that some of the people in the town wouldn't jump him or something. She didn't want to lose her brother to a hate crime – especially so soon to him being able to escape.

She made a resolution to herself, then. If Billy was so intent on protecting her from Neil, then Max would protect him from everyone else.

She closed her eyes, trying to go to sleep, only to snap them open at the mental image that forced its way in of Billy beaten and dying – by Neil or by homophobic bastards, it didn't matter if he was gone.

Grimacing to herself, she finally threw the covers off her legs, grabbing the throw blanket that Steve had gotten for her for movie nights weeks ago and went to the door, walking out into the hallway.

She hesitated in front of Steve's door, listening closely in case walking in would interrupt anything – intimate. She would turn back immediately if she heard anything suspect, forget needing the comfort of her brother's presence for now.

But it was silent inside, so she carefully turned the knob, silent as she stepped in and closed the door behind her. Billy was lying on the side of the bed closer to the door, on his back and face slackened with sleep, while Steve was snuggled into his side, face hidden in Billy's neck and arm draped across Billy's front, careful even in sleep not to jostle hurt ribs. Max remembered the crack when Neil had kicked Billy in the chest, was glad to see that his ribs were bound now to restrict movement.

Billy stirred when she lifted the covers, turning his head to blink blearily at her.

"What do you want, shitbird?" he mumbled quietly, even as he lifted his arm so that she could scoot in next to him.

"Shut up," Max muttered, lying carefully next to him and pulling the covers and her blanket over her. Billy tugged her closer with an arm around her shoulders, apparently impatient at the too-careful care she was giving his injuries.

"If you kick me in your sleep, I'll kick you off the damn bed," Billy threatened, but his eyes were already closing again, arm tightening around her shoulders for a moment in a way that told her his threat was empty.

Breathing a sigh of relief, she closed her eyes too, and unlike when she had tried going to sleep on her own, she dropped off quickly.

It was nice, living with Steve. They didn't have to worry about being quiet for fear of pissing off the man of the house, they didn't have to wake up at a certain time to get out of Neil's way, and they could eat any time they wanted rather than relying on set meal times with Susan's cooking. Best of all was the fact that they didn't have to be constantly looking over their shoulder for when they (or Billy, as the case may be) might be the target of a casual backhand or yelling.

But Max knew that it couldn't last. She was pretty sure Billy knew it too, but he was just in denial about it, enjoying living with his boyfriend too much.

Which is why she decided that she had to be the bad guy here, the one to remind them of what their lifestyle necessitated.

"We can't live here forever," she declared abruptly when they were sitting together for dinner in the living room. Both boys froze abruptly, Steve dropping the hand holding the fried chicken back to his paper plate, while Billy licked his lips anxiously, looking away.

"We'll figure something out," Billy spoke first, and Steve shook his head rapidly.

"No – you guys are fine to stay here, I promise!" he insisted.

"I don't mean that we would move out," Max said. "We have to go back home."

"That's *not* home!" Steve argued. "You can't..."

"We've been here for a week," Max cut him off. "Neil is probably willing to keep quiet about Billy being gay for now, but if we don't

go back he's going to get complacent. He'll think Billy doesn't have the balls to back up his words and it will just get worse. The likelihood that he would out you is pretty high, just so that he can get back at you for beating him."

Billy's nostrils flared. "You think I care about the bastards of Hawkins knowing I'm queer?" he demanded, face reddening. "I'll take *that* if it means keeping you safe."

"But it's not just *you* that would get hurt if that happens," Max pointed out. "People look at you long enough, they'll know Steve is involved, and they'll go after him, too."

Billy's brow furrowed, and he went silent, looking conflicted as he glanced between them.

"I don't mean that you need to choose who to keep safe," Max hurried to say, because like hell would she want that. Steve was basically her brother already, and she wouldn't *dream* of forcing Billy to make such an impossible decision. "But if we go back home before too long, Neil will still be afraid you'll do something, and we can keep that up. We don't even have to live there all the time – just enough to let him know you're serious."

"And how do you think you're going to have to prove that?" Steve demanded, looking a little hysterical as he looked between them. "He's going to hit you again...!"

"He'll *try*," Billy cut him off with a frown. He looked over at Steve, expression pleading for him to understand. "I won't let it get bad. But I have to watch Max. Maybe in a few months, it will be easier for her to do her own thing, escape Neil. But she's thirteen. And we wait too long, I wouldn't put it past Neil to report me for kidnapping or some shit. This is the *only* way that I can keep you both safe, for now."

"I've fought *monsters* – I can deal with Neil Fucking Hargrove!" Steve spat.

"But it wouldn't be just him who would hate you, Stevie, and you know it," Billy said, taking Steve's hand carefully. "It would be half of Hawkins. Max is right – we can't stay here forever."

And Max knew she was. She knew she was right. But as Steve yanked his hand away from Billy and ran from the room, it didn't taste like victory – it tasted like defeat.

Billy found Steve sitting at the desk in his room, legs pulled up on the chair and staring blankly at a Polaroid of the two of them that they'd taken back in February, pinned up next to his calendar he kept for reminders. In the picture, they were seated on the hood of Billy's Camaro, pulled in close to each other. Half of Steve's face was out of view, but you could see his bright smile while Billy wagged his tongue at the camera obnoxiously. For once, there had been no lingering bruises on Billy's face. (Billy didn't care for the picture much; he liked the one they'd taken moments later much better, with Steve's happy face being the one that took up the frame, Billy's profile just visible as he teasingly gnawed at Steve's neck. It was unmistakably intimate, and they could never show it to anyone because it was obvious they were both boys, but he still treasured it and kept it in the glove box of his Camaro.)

He wasn't dwelling on that at the moment though, taking in his boyfriend's upset profile as he leaned against the door frame. He didn't say anything at first, in case Steve needed to get something off his chest before Billy started with his apologies.

"Do you know how much it fucking *kills* me, every time you have to go back to that house?" Steve whispered, not looking over at him. "I know you don't like to talk about everything that goes on there, and God, I *get it*, but that doesn't mean I'm ignorant to it all."

"Steve," Billy started, because Steve was guilty of thinking he was stupid so many times, and he never wanted to encourage that – but Steve kept talking like Billy hadn't said anything.

"You know the first time I thought something wasn't right?" he said vaguely, still staring at the Polaroid on the wall. "That night with the dogs. The tunnels. You were so *desperate* to get you and Max home. I wanted to just invite you guys to stay at my place instead – but we didn't really know each other, and I thought you might back off and avoid me if I said anything. That's why I didn't say anything at school

that day either, after seeing the bruise that made it so *fucking* obvious what had happened.

“And I’ve tried. I’ve backed off when it seemed like you needed it, because I figured you would *do* something if it got bad enough. But now you want to go back, you want to live with him *again*, after everything that’s happened, and you expect me to be happy about *letting* you.”

“I don’t expect you to be happy about it,” Billy denied. “*None* of us are happy about it, but it’s life. It won’t be forever.”

Steve finally looked over at him then, and Billy noticed for the first time that while Steve’s expression was mostly blank, his eyes were full of a pain that spilled out in rivulets of tears down his cheeks. His breath caught at the sight, hurting at the sight of Steve so sad, because of the pain *Billy* caused.

“Did I do something wrong?” Steve asked him mournfully, not making a move to wipe away his tears. “Should I have said something in the beginning? Do you not believe that you’re *safe* here? That I want you here as long as you’re willing to be?”

“Oh, baby,” Billy breathed, heart clenching, and he hurried forward to pull Steve close. Steve readily accepted the half-desperate hug, pressing his face into Billy’s stomach. “No. No, this isn’t because of you at *all*. Or, not the bad parts, anyway. Neil is a piece of shit, and I want to keep you *and* Max safe – this is the only way I see that being possible, for now.”

Steve sniffed, rubbing his face against Billy’s stomach and probably getting snot all over his shirt, but he didn’t care because at least the boy wasn’t pushing him away, as he’d half feared as soon as he had agreed with Max’s comments.

“At least you’ll be out of there in three months,” Steve mumbled, pulling away after a few moments and clearly sounding like he was trying to console himself with his words. “Still too fucking long. But I bet Hopper or Joyce would take Max as much as they can when she’s alone there.”

Billy's heart gave another pang at that, because that was actually half the reason he'd come up to talk to Steve then and not some time later on. He gnawed on his lip and said, "Yeah, that's...I'm going to have to change my plans. I'm not going to California in September."

Steve's eyes darted up to look at him, confused and a little wary. "What? Why not?"

"I need to watch over Max for just a little longer," Billy said heavily. "I thought she would be fine before, but Neil found out about Lucas sooner than I thought he would, and...she'll turn fifteen next summer, and then the law won't be so intent on getting her back with her parents whenever she disappears..."

"But she'll still be a child!" Steve protested. "How is next year going to be any better or worse for her?!"

"It's just the way the law works," Billy said gently. He'd looked into all this shit before – once someone was fifteen, the law didn't care about problem children so long as they weren't breaking the law whenever they disappeared. They had more pressing concerns. "Once she's fifteen, she could live with Joyce or Hopper all the time and no one would really worry about it even with Neil or Susan's complaining. At thirteen or fourteen it looks more like she was kidnapped by whoever she was found with, and we can't do that to Hopper or Joyce. So I'm going to hold off on California until then, just so that I can keep my eye on her and on Neil."

Steve shook his head furiously, tears beginning to stream anew down his cheeks. "Why can't we just *tell* someone?" he begged. "We can put Neil behind bars forever, and not have to worry about all of this!"

Billy shook his head in denial. "The justice system is flawed. There's no guarantee he wouldn't be able to get out and just make things that much worse back home. We can't risk pissing him off."

"There's got to be *something*..."

"There isn't," Billy cut him off, and looked away from those tear-soaked eyes. "You don't have to get involved in all of this, though – having to look over your shoulder for people like my old man wasn't

exactly in your expectations when we started dating. You can still head to California in September, and I can meet you there next year, if you still want us to be together by then...”

Steve’s hand shot out to grab Billy’s arm, squeezing tight like his hold was the only thing that would keep Billy there. “Don’t be an idiot,” he snapped, tears disappearing as he found something else to be angry at. “California has never been the destination for me – *you* are. And if you’re so insistent on staying here, then like hell am I leaving either. We’re in this together, asshole.”

Billy’s lips twitched in a reluctant smile. He wanted to argue, to convince Steve to get out while he could, but a greater part of him was just glad to have this amazing man at his side. He bent down to press a kiss to Steve’s lips.

“Love you too,” he murmured, and then went back to kissing the brunette.

A few moments later, Steve pulled back suddenly, and said, “Let’s go on a trip. Out of Hawkins, for a few days.”

Billy raised an eyebrow at him, going to lean against the desk, half sitting on the edge of it. “Can’t exactly disappear on the shitbird, right now,” he commented.

Steve shook his head, waving his hand a little. “Not right *now*. Next week is the Fourth, and I don’t have work the day after, and I can ask Robin to cover my shifts for the weekend. If we’re not going to California at the end of summer, let’s just take a small vacation, just for us.”

Billy’s lips twitched in another smile, fondness filling him as he looked at his boyfriend’s determined expression. “Where would we even go?”

“My family has a cabin in Michigan,” Steve proposed. “It’s about a four hour drive, and it’s super secluded – we wouldn’t be interrupted at all. We can just spend the time together. Max could stay with El or with the Byerses so we wouldn’t have to worry about her.”

Billy raised an eyebrow, making a show of contemplating Steve's proposal, before he smiled and moved, settling himself over Steve's lap to pull him into a kiss.

"Sounds perfect," he decided.

Billy stepped out from the locker rooms, taking a last puff from his cigarette before he tossed it to the side. He couldn't stamp it out with bare feet, but it would burn out on its own against the concrete, out of the way of foot traffic because he wasn't a complete asshole. His eyes were already scanning the pool area instinctively, despite the fact that he wasn't technically on duty yet, but he was feeling tense anyway and he *wanted* someone to be breaking the rules just so that he had an excuse to yell.

And then he saw a familiar chunky boy running around the perimeter of the pool – he was a repeat offender and he would make the perfect target.

Gotcha.

The whistle shrieked around the area, echoing loudly off the concrete and causing everyone to come to a halt, heads swinging to look at Billy standing on the other side of the pool.

"Hey, lard-ass!" Billy yelled at the chunky boy who had skidded to a halt as soon as the whistle blew and he realized he was in trouble. He looked guiltily at Billy, sheepish already – as he should be, because he knew the rules by now and had been yelled at often enough for breaking them. "No running on my watch. I gotta warn you again, and you're banned for life. You wanna be banned for life, lard-ass?"

The boy shook his head quickly, shoulders hunched, eyes wide. He'd already been banned for a week before – Billy would've thought he would've learned by now that Billy wasn't messing around. He wasn't about to go diving in to grab an unconscious boy who'd slipped from running and no one noticed he was drowning. (Or, he would, because it was his job. But he'd rather forestall problems like that.)

“Didn’t think so,” Billy grouched, and blew the whistle again, and everyone went back to what they’d been doing before, noise level rising once again. The boy he’d called out walked along the edge of the pool with mincing steps, going back toward the diving board again and clearly aware that Billy was watching him.

Just as he began walking again, a familiar hand tugged at his arm just before Max fell into step with him, teasing grin on her face. The bruise on her cheekbone was fading, a green-yellow color that clashed against the building sunburn across her nose.

“You’re grumpy,” she sang at him, following as he walked to the lifeguard chair.

“Am not,” Billy said grumpily.

“I know you know Dylan Cook’s name,” Max argued, referring to the boy he’d called ‘lard-ass’ a moment ago. “You default to name-calling when you’re grumpy. It’s okay to miss Steve – it’s *adorable*.”

“Go bother your dweeb friends,” Billy snapped, but they both knew that he wasn’t truly angry. She was right – Steve had gone to Indianapolis to get some cash out of the bank, because the cabin his family owned was surrounded by places that only took cash and not card for at least thirty miles in every direction. Billy knew that Steve would be back that night, but it was just the fact that Steve wasn’t nearby that made him antsy, even if he wouldn’t have seen him anyway.

“And you *definitely* know *their* names,” Max declared, laughing when he shoved her a little in the side. “Anyway, I’m just headed out in a minute – Dustin gets home today *finally*, and we’re going to go surprise him.” Her eyes glowed with glee at the thought of messing with her friend – Billy didn’t even want to know what plans were in store for the boy, with a look like that.

“Who’s picking you up?” Billy asked her as he climbed into the lifeguard chair, eyes beginning to scan the pool once more as he talked with the redhead. Dustin’s house was too far from the pool to walk or skateboard – it was even farther than the Hargrove house.

“Mrs. Sinclair,” Max responded promptly. “Then we’ll probably be at Dustin’s house for the rest of the day, if we don’t end up back here.”

“Alright, I get off at seven – don’t go home before then,” Billy instructed.

They had gone back to the Hargrove house earlier that week, and Billy had been careful not to leave Max home alone when Neil wouldn’t be at work. Thus far Neil had glared and made snide comments at them, but he hadn’t tried anything yet. Billy knew it was only a matter of time, and he wanted to be ready – whether to take the brunt of it, if need be, or to get him away from Max again. Max knew this well enough, and hardly chafed at the veritable babysitting that she had to deal with at the moment, because she knew anyone else would just agree with him.

(When the other kids had seen the bruise, they had been appalled, but they had all been sworn to secrecy because of the connection to Billy and Steve and what might happen if anyone else found out about them. Billy had gotten a stink eye from Lucas for that one, but it just made him like the kid more, because he was so protective of Max. The stink eye had disappeared when he’d been at the pool a few days before, and he saw for the first time the angry bruising from Billy’s cracked rib and realized that Billy wasn’t exactly getting away from this unscathed either. Now they were just in the same boat of liking the other because they cared about Max, which suited Billy just fine. Not that he cared about Lucas, or anything. The fact that the younger boy cared about him didn’t affect him at all, and the week and a half of silent treatment and dirty looks had been a relief from his presence. Honest.)

“Alright, radio me whenever you’re headed home,” Max told him, backing away with a little smirk, because she knew how much Billy disliked the nerd radio that had been gifted to him a few weeks before – or at least how much he pretended to dislike it. Mostly it was the association to the nerds about to enter high school that irked him, and how stupid he looked with the huge block in his hand, antenna pointed out. Dustin kept insisting that Billy was definitely a part of the Party now, even if he didn’t play D&D with them, because Steve was too and they’d both proven themselves enough fighting demodogs and protecting the other members. Billy just shoved him

any time he called him their “Monk”, whatever the hell that was supposed to mean. (He was certain that it was an insult of some kind. He’d rather be called a “Rogue”, like Steve – that sounded *much* cooler. Not that he would ever tell that to any of the dweebs – they didn’t need that kind of encouragement or ammunition.)

Billy kicked his foot lightly in Max’s direction, more a warning than actual intent to kick her, and she backed away with a laugh, waving at him before grabbing her bag from beside Mrs. Wheeler, who had promised to keep it safe while she watched Holly. His eyes trailed over the women, and then after Max as she disappeared to the front.

He looked back at the pool then, frowning a little as he went back to watching to make sure everyone was playing safe. It was barely noon, the sun high in the sky, and he couldn’t go to Steve’s house until the next day, when Max would be busy with her friends again and out of Neil’s grasp.

He wished he’d grabbed an Icee on the way out – something cold sounded good. But maybe that was just a subconscious desire to visit Scoops and see Steve, despite the fact that he wasn’t even there right then.

He sighed. *Patience*, he scolded himself. *Just a few more hours before I can get out of here.*

Steve tapped his thumb on his steering wheel along with the rhythm of the song playing over the radio. His banker’s envelope of money sat on the passenger seat next to him, and he had the vague thought that maybe he shouldn’t just leave it out in the open like that, despite the fact that he was driving and no one could exactly break in to steal it like that, before he dismissed it as paranoia.

He was looking forward to next weekend. The idea of having Billy all to himself for four whole days sounded endlessly appealing – he had all sorts of ideas for what they could do together, and not all of them were sex. He had gotten Robin to agree to cover his shifts next weekend, who had gagged theatrically as soon as Steve had told her where he was going and who he was going with but still practically

shoved him out the door to go and get the cash from the bank that would allow it.

He had been looking forward to California with Billy, had even looked forward to going to school, to some extent. Maybe that part was just a desire to get out of Hawkins, but the excitement was still there.

And it wasn't that he didn't mind waiting another year – he did. But not because of California, or school, or even what his dad might say when he finally screwed up the courage to admit to him that school would have to be put off for another year, and yet unable to tell him why. He couldn't exactly admit that it was because of a boy – John would certainly cut him off then in *everything*, let alone paying his way through school.

No, he minded because waiting meant leaving Billy and Max in that *hellhole* for a whole extra year. He had some tentative plans for going to Hopper for help with Max's situation, because at least if they were leaving then Hawkins couldn't turn on them – but they would certainly come to the defense of the Sinclairs. Steve legitimately couldn't think of anyone who disliked them for their race, and as a lawyer and a well-loved school teacher, Mr. and Mrs. Sinclair garnered a lot of respect from most of the Hawkins residents. Steve was certain that Max would be taken care of, with Billy and Steve gone and unable to muddy people's feelings with homophobia that was certainly present even if they weren't racist. The problem was getting Steve and Billy out of the picture first – and convincing Billy of this as well.

A weekend together was a paltry compromise compared to that, but Steve was doing the best he could with what Billy allowed. He was absolutely going to spoil the shit out of him, though, because honestly the blond deserved it.

His lips curved as he imagined Billy spread out before him on the bed inside the cabin. Billy was always so needy, so willing to take whatever Steve gave him in bed, and it always gave Steve a thrill that Billy trusted him so much to let his guard down enough to let Steve take charge. When Steve realized though where his thoughts were going, he had to remind himself that he was still driving, that he was

just about a half hour out from home and he could explore his imagination there, but certainly not now where he was liable to be a distracted driver as he fought a hard-on.

He forced the gut-stirring image away, and it shifted then, to one where he brought Billy breakfast in bed, waking him up with the smell of coffee and a kiss. He made a mental note to stop at a grocery store on the way up so that they had enough food that wasn't canned to last them through the weekend. If he remembered correctly, there was a small mart in the town nearest to the cabin, and Billy could pick out some food too –

Something crashed into the windshield, interrupting his thoughts and startling him enough to jerk the wheel as though he could avoid something that had already hit him. The car spun and he went off the road, and he heard Hopper's voice suddenly in his head – *You're ever in a crash, go limp. Too many people tense up, and their injuries are worse for it.*

His heart was pounding, but he tried to force himself to relax, just as the car crashed into something at the side, throwing his head the other way, right into the window. He winced, already feeling the pain shooting through him, blood dripping into his eyebrow. He looked up at his windshield, at the starburst shattered across it and a mess of leaves or some shit stuck to it. He didn't really process it, grabbing for the door handle blindly and practically falling out of the car.

His head felt woozy, his vision spinning and shifting, and he had the vague thought that he definitely had a concussion. He stumbled to his feet, using his car as support as he dragged himself up. Hazily, he wondered if there was a house or a phone booth nearby so that he could get help, because he probably shouldn't try driving like this, even if his car turned out to be working. He felt like he was drunk.

Blowing out a breath and fighting the rising nausea from the pain in his head, he straightened, squinting at the sign on the building above him. It was blurry and bouncing back and forth, but after several moments he could make out the faded letters under a dimly lit bulb.

Brimborn Steelworks.

Author's Note:

OKAY BEFORE I LOSE ANYONE LET ME REMIND YOU THAT I DON'T BELIEVE IN ANYTHING BUT HAPPY ENDINGS. So Steve is definitely not going to die. Neither is Billy. Or any of our faves.

That being said, I hope you enjoyed reading this installment. I don't have a word of the next one written yet but I have so many plans, so we will see how quickly I can get that one out. Thank you for reading! Feel free to scream in the comments. ;)

P.S. I know nothing about Dungeons and Dragons, but I did some light Googling and Wikipedia-ing, and a "monk" seemed to fit Billy? At least on the surface? I base that off of the description on Wikipedia as "a fantasy martial artist, specializing in unarmed combat", because he's protective and a fighter. But also further descriptions kind of show the character as weak? I'm not sure if this is a good character - it's kinda confusing to me. I chose a Rogue for Steve because he goes rogue with the Mind Flayer possessing him, and it seemed like a strong character. I'm going to keep that one, but if anyone has a better idea for Billy, please tell me and explain it to me because I literally have no idea. XD Thanks!